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ENGAGED UNIVERSITIES

The 'quintessential university' for new times?

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"Engaged Universities"
The 'quintessential university' for new times?

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A modern society's goal should be to maximise the production and distribution of knowledge, to combine in a single ideal democratic and economic imperatives... Political empowerment and economic opportunity stem from the same root: the spread of knowledge.

(Charles Leadbeater, 1999, p.222)

A short history of the university

Universities have proven themselves adaptable over the long term – they're among the oldest surviving organisations, along with the Catholic Church and the Icelandic Parliament.

That survival is based on fulfilling some fundamental human needs, like the puberty rite (which we now call teaching) and the need to establish pecking orders without violence (which we now call research).

Since the 1600s universities have shown themselves useful as boot camps for professional cadres: lawyers, doctors, soldiers; and more recently for the administrators of modernity: bureaucrats and the business 'manageriat.'

Since the 19th century some of them, especially in the state-directed tradition, have also been active in scientific invention. In the mass age of the 20th century, universities became the chosen mechanism for the mass communication of mechanised expertise. This enabled the elite ones at least to be in at the birth of the inventions and innovations that produced the information revolution.

Now, we're facing 'new times'; and universities must adapt again. How will barely post-medieval institutions cope with the accelerating tempo of technologically-driven change in the 21st century? What are universities *for*?

Closed innovation process

In the past, universities were built around stored knowledge (the library; the lab).

Modernisation meant abandoning the medieval library and switching from the preservation to the expansion of knowledge. The model of innovation – the implementation of creative ideas – was borrowed from manufacturing industry.

Industrial-era knowledge was best produced by a closed, linear process of innovation. Bright people with scientific expertise would be isolated (in labs) where they may be as creative as they liked; then the fruits of their ideas were codified, scaled and transmitted, via controlled sequential process (protected by patents that ensured inventions were only used as inventors decreed not as users liked) down a pipeline, also controlled by the producer organization, to waiting consumers.

This model of innovation as a closed production line is shared by research labs, elite universities, the creative departments of companies, city planners etc.

Open innovation networks

But it is breaking down. Expertise is migrating out of organizations along with technologies, and organizations are open to external sources of innovation, not least through globalisation, travel and increasing participation in tertiary education. Innovation is myriad-sourced.

Consumption is increasingly co-production: it is active not passive, making not just taking, using not behaving.

And while learning is a fundamental requirement of innovation it cannot be confined to the elite organization or research centre. Learning becomes a porous, distributed system, and innovation becomes an open network.

The propagation of innovation throughout society has begun and consumers are no longer passive, they're participants. In the 'pro-am economy' consumers are sources of ideas, redefining products. Inventions are not complete until explored, extended or even reinvented by users.

In open models, innovation is democratic not technocratic; it needs the widest possible base of participation, not isolated expert elites, patented applications and controlled value chains. Knowledge requires 'flow' as well as 'base.'

Innovation is a true science/arts hybrid – it has a science or engineering component and a culture of use. Innovation requires the promotion of diversity and interaction, as well as research.

Exclusion of consumers

Meanwhile, lay people are more or less excluded from formal knowledge *production* – it is their job to learn how to be wise *consumers*.

The division of labour between producer and consumer is one of the most extreme in modernity. Production is the sphere of government, business, organisation, control, and in this context innovation is a closed system of applied expertise.

Consumers are reduced to passive, feminised *behaviour* (not action), manipulated by marketing which is controlled by psychological expertise, so that the innovations prepared for them will be taken up and accepted; the more docilely the better.

The interests of business, government, and expert elites on the one hand and consumers on the other were never fully aligned in the industrial era.

In the middle grew up the entertainment industry.

Mediation of knowledge

Professional scientists often fail to connect with the public at all. Looked at from the outside they seem to be organised as a pre-modern priesthood. Science requires extreme length of apprenticeship, arcane knowledge, bizarre and not very appealing dress codes, living in institutions, celibacy.

Meanwhile popular interest in science has never been higher. The demand for truthful knowledge is evidenced by the success of National Geographic; the Discovery and History channels on pay-TV; the popularity of science-based drama from forensic and medical shows to science fiction; and not least by the passionate uptake of science-based causes, from conservation to HIV/AIDS activism, genetics to global warming.

The imperative therefore is to bring elite science together with public understanding via media formats that people are known to like and understand.

The entertainment industry really does know how to teach uncommitted citizens about truths they don't necessarily want to face. We call that miracle 'the news.' Since the first realistic novel was published it has been the entertainment industry's job to translate observation, truth, science, creativity and innovation into a popular idiom; to recruit the lay public to the story of modernity.

(Narrow the) gulf between expert elites and popular consumers

But there's a growing disconnect between the lay population and elite knowledge institutions. Very little attention has been given to consumer demand, because the market for it to date has been restricted to companies and governments, not the general population.

But at the same time, with every improvement in digital interactive technology, the possibilities for lay people to engage directly but informally in creative innovation grow as fast as Moore's law.

For example, check out consumer co-creation of games content; the open source movement; Digital Storytelling; the 'pro-am' economy; music sharing; podcasting; blogging; online journalism; the Wikipedia.

Learning and research organisations like universities must venture much further into that intermediate space between expert elites and the citizen-consumer, because this intermediate space of popular realism is the 'medium' for growing user-led, consumer co-created innovation.

Creative workforce needed for creating wealth

Students must develop their creative and critical talents, but simply training in a specialist area is not nearly good enough.

They must learn how to manage a portfolio-career, not staying long with a single employer or even industry, self-employed or working as casual labour. Work may be project-based, in teams with multiple partners who change over time, in an international environment. Entry-level workforce jobs are very different from wealth-creating destinations.

Businesses of the 21st century will themselves be more like design workshops (ateliers). It will no longer be enough to manage industrial scale and efficient processes. Instead of organising firms around permanent staff and ongoing tasks, where success flows from controlling big budgets and many employees, firms are increasingly organised around projects, with teams that may dissolve and re-

form, and maximum interaction and creative feedback from clients and customers (Martin, 2005, p.85).

Education needs to be integrated into this environment, not completed beforehand. In fact most students are already working; perhaps that's why project management and entrepreneurship are becoming core skills, and 'life design' (work-life balance) an increasing priority. But why aren't most workers also studying?

Academics as 'producers'

In this context, academic work needs to be less 'industrially' organised with a large permanent workforce (who see management responsibilities as a spectator sport to which the proper response is to make catcalls from the sidelines).

Academics should not be organised as workers, trained (never to be retrained) for ongoing tasks like timetabled teaching that remain the same throughout a career.

Instead, academics need to become more like 'producers' of the film and television variety – managing short-term projects that successfully bring together:

- *an idea* – flexible curriculum based not on 'disciplinary truths' but on 'learning services'
- *a team* – (7 is the magic number) that may include adjuncts and outsourced professionals; a pool of freelance talent working and teaching as part of their own portfolio as is common in creative arts
- *resources* – including fundraising and competitive project funding
- *clients* – students, but not only neophytes enrolled in time-based programs; they may be senior industry players extending their skills while working
- *a process* – appropriate pedagogy, not taking a semester, or three years, to do what can be done intensively, or involve doing on campus what may better be delivered in the workplace.

Success here results not from seniority of place within a hierarchy but from academic entrepreneurship. The risk in any one project is that the idea or team may not attract enough clients or resources to proceed; and in any case not everything proposed will be funded.

Actually academics are already well used to this regime – it governs research funding and the research process.

It's an intriguing model for teaching because it models what is done in the economic sector that we face, and it encourages innovation rather than repetition in the classroom, including the possibility of 'failing forwards towards success.'

A university of the future?

The organisational unit that houses creative education won't look much like a university. It will be more like a 'creative production house.' It might be privately owned; certainly its own staff would expect equity in it to be among their incentives and rewards. Universities are integrated into consumer services, career development and the 'experience' economy.

They might display the following characteristics:

1. *Research led* –
 - a. external environment not disciplinary legacy
 - b. end-user focus not supply-side expertise
 - c. institutional renewal driven by research as the model for teaching.
2. *Interdisciplinary* –
 - a. among creative disciplines, to bring together creative and performing arts, media and communication, and digital technologies, oriented to the 'new economy' and commercial applications of artistic talent
 - b. among many disciplines, for example Law, Business, IT, Education; because innovation requires regulation, entrepreneurship, technology, and human capital (workforce and consumer).
3. *International* –
 - a. 'whatever the question, the answer is China.' Or India.
 - b. There needs to be trade in educational qualifications in this era of global creative services, and development programs to extend capabilities to less favoured regions.
4. *Distributed* – involving partners in
 - a. industry
 - b. different levels of educational provision (schools/HE/VET)
 - c. agencies to promote transition from education to economic productivity.
5. *Bicameral* – increasingly
 - a. undergraduate education for general education towards 'creative consumer-citizenship';

- b. postgraduate training for 'craft.'
- 6. *Integrated values*
 - a. theory, practice and critique folded into innovation
 - b. symbolic and economic values folded into educational outcomes.

Since they're the drivers of innovation and economic growth in a service economy, the question must be asked: what do *consumers* want from education, science, innovation, and new technologies?

Despite their dependence on student demand, universities have not fully 'engaged' with this community, seeing it as the destination rather than the source of knowledge. But the 'quintessential' university for the 'new times' will be one that joins an open innovation network to learn from active, co-creative consumers.

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